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ABSTRACT

Community involvement in rural school facilities improvement projects is significant to the success of these projects. While literature regarding school-community partnerships and citizen involvement in school construction projects appears to be ample, writing which specifically addresses community involvement in rural school facilities is far less common. This report examines the community-school relationship in a rural school facilities improvement project in Waitsburg, Washington. It offers a brief review of relevant literature and then takes an indepth look at the Waitsburg community's role in their facilities improvement project. The project included the complete renovation and restoration of a historic school building to serve as a junior high facility and the remodeling and new construction required to upgrade the elementary school building. The report shows the importance of having positive contributions by community groups and individuals in completing these projects. It further reveals how productive involvement in school district operations is fostered through open communication, responsiveness to community wishes, and the creation of a sense of community ownership. (Contains 23 endnotes and 27 references). (GR)

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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT FOR IMPROVING RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES

By

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For presentation at the
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Community Involvement for Improving Rural School Facilities

Introduction

The topic of community involvement in rural school facilities improvement projects holds significance for school administrators, board members, parents, and other community residents in rural areas. In particular, those who are anticipating or implementing such projects may benefit from a more thorough understanding of the dynamics of community participation. For such individuals, it may be profitable to gather insights from the experiences of others as well as from a review of relevant literature. This paper is intended to provide a brief overview of the context for the topic from the literature as well as an in depth look at community involvement in a rural school facilities project in Washington state.

Within the literature, references to school-community partnerships and parental involvement in schools are plentiful. Popular education journals such as Educational Leadership and Phi Delta Kappan recently devoted entire issues to this concept.[1] The International Journal of Educational Research dedicated its first issue of 1996 to publication of an edited version of reports from a dozen different countries, all focused on the

movement toward "boundary crossing" in education to involve families and communities.[2] A recently published book by George Michel on education reform emphasizes that community and parental involvement are integral elements for success in implementing reform initiatives.[3]

References to school-community involvement and parental participation in rural schools also appear frequently in the literature. An interesting example is found in a study which examined doctoral dissertations on rural education issues over a four-year period.[4] The third most common dissertation topic was school-community partnerships, topped only by studies on the topics of the overall effectiveness of rural education and human resources for rural schools.

A second example is found in the research conducted by Bruce Miller at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) which focused attention on identifying ways that rural schools can become a catalyst for community rehabilitation and development.[5] Subsequently, the Rural Education Program at NWREL developed and piloted a school-community renewal program in five regional school districts. In his keynote address at the 1994 International Conference of the Rural Education Research and Development Centre, Paul Nachtigal emphasized this concept, asserting that rural schools have the potential to play a significant role in the economic and cultural health of their communities.[6]

A limited review of the literature also reveals numerous references to community involvement in school construction projects. The majority of

these are opinion pieces or "how to" guides which appear primarily in journals and guidebooks intended for use by school facility design consultants and planners. Several articles have appeared in Educational Facility Planner stressing the importance of community involvement beyond mere support for obtaining public financing to include participation in assessing needs, determining the scope of the project, and serving as advocates to interpret the project for the general public.[7] Guidebooks have also been published which provide extensive direction regarding the application of various components of community involvement in planning school facilities projects.[8]

Writing for the American School Board Journal Sally Zakariya asserts that decisions surrounding school facilities improvement projects evoke a politically charged challenge and that the key to success is obtaining community involvement.[9] Ben Graves advises readers of the Educational Facility Planner that involving the public at the early stages of facility project planning is important and suggests that advisory committees should include broad-based representation.[10] Randall Yearwood offers the suggestion that architects should complete large portions of their work on site at the school district, rather than in their offices, to assure ample input from school and community representatives.[11]

Another type of community involvement may be observed in the trend toward joint-use projects which is documented in the literature.[12] As an example, a school district may agree to share the use of a newly constructed gymnasium with the community in return for funding participation from

the city, or a performing arts auditorium may be shared with a local arts council in return for financial support.

While literature regarding school-community partnerships and citizen involvement in school construction projects appears to be ample, writing which specifically addresses community involvement in rural school facilities projects is far less common. Brief references to a few such pieces are included here.

As noted previously, school construction projects carry the potential to become politically charged community issues. This may be due in part to the fact that schools deal with two very sensitive areas of people's lives - their children and their money.[13] A case study by Robert Carlson, published in Research in Rural Education in 1990, documents how a rural school project can also become the focal point for drawing a divided community together.[14] Steven Deller studied the effects of an aging rural population on financial support for schools and found that a higher percentage of retirees does not necessarily have an adverse impact on the passage of school bond elections.[15] Writing about a successful effort to pass a bond referendum to build two elementary schools in rural Virginia, Richard Greig offers recommendations that include starting the campaign early, establishing a grassroots organization, stressing school needs, and reaching the public.[16] Freeman writes about how a school board member in a small community used a homemade video to garner support for a facilities improvement project.[17]

In many cases, rural areas are also characterized by poverty, making the task of providing local financial support for improving school facilities even more daunting. The capacity to harness local resources to assist may be crucial. Tamang writes about how community participation has been encouraged and harnessed to help plan and construct low-cost, technically acceptable school facilities in Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world.[18] Voluntary community organizations may also play a significant role in building support for and doing the work of improving school buildings. A recent issue of Small Town included an article that described how diverse volunteer organizations have developed to address community needs and outlined their impact on community improvement, local activities, and area schools.[19]

Having touched upon contextual elements in the literature, the remaining pages of this report are intended to provide a description of how community involvement played a predominant role in a recent school facilities improvement project in Waitsburg, Washington. The project included the complete renovation and restoration of a historic school building to serve as a junior high facility and the remodeling and new construction required to upgrade the elementary school building. In order to provide a clear picture of the ways in which the community became involved in the project it is important to first give a brief description of Waitsburg and the school district.

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The Community of Waitsburg

Located in rural southeastern Washington state, the town of Waitsburg is situated along the Touchet River near the foothills of the Blue Mountains. The town is surrounded by rolling wheat fields and is positioned directly along the route taken by Lewis and Clark in their historic overland expedition to the Pacific Ocean. Before the town was founded in 1865, Native Americans made their camps along the streams nearby. With a population of just over one thousand people, Waitsburg is a quiet community that boasts of being "One of a Kind." It is the only city in the state which still operates under the terms of its Territorial Charter. Other nearby towns include Dayton which is located ten miles to the north (population two thousand), Prescott which lies eight miles to the west (population three hundred), and Walla Walla, located twenty miles to the south (population 30,000).

Although not exceptionally isolated, Waitsburg has a very strong "sense of community." Many area residents make some type of community involvement a priority. Local service clubs complete a variety of fund raising and development projects specifically for the benefit of the local community. The school district is the largest employer in town with fifty-five employees followed by the McGregor farm chemical dealer which provides jobs for about thirty employees.

Waitsburg is a wheat farming community, and agriculture is the foundation of the local economy. While a number of community residents

work on farms or in farm-related businesses, and others work in the towns' stores and businesses, many commute to jobs in nearby towns. Waitsburg is also home to a number of retired citizens as well as those who are receiving some form of public assistance and are not employed.

The School District

Waitsburg School District, in many ways, is the hub of life in the community. High school athletic, music, and drama programs provide the primary "place to go" for many local residents. School facilities are also utilized by the community as a central location for a variety of meetings and activities. The district serves approximately 410 students in a physical plant consisting of three school buildings located on a single campus. The elementary school (K-6) is located in the center of the campus in a building initially constructed in 1949. The junior high school (grades 7-8) is housed in a 1913 building known as Preston Hall. The high school, which was originally built in 1926, serves students in grades 9-12. A gymnasium and vocational-agricultural shop were added to the high school in 1964. An athletic field, which includes a football field, track, baseball field, and field house, is situated about three blocks from the main campus.

The Project

The need to initiate a major school facilities improvement project in Waitsburg was made clear in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The key factors

were growing enrollment and aging facilities. The elementary school building, initially constructed in 1949 was struck by a fire in 1964 which destroyed the multipurpose room, kitchen facility, and music room. Although this section of the building was rebuilt, the classroom wings remained in their original state. The use of low-cost construction materials and methods coupled with aging or inadequate mechanical and electrical systems made serious needs evident. In addition, asbestos was present in nearly every part of the building, and features to improve the energy efficiency of the building were almost totally lacking. Classroom space for special education and technology were not adequate, and the library, which serves all district students in grades K-12, was much to small to serve the needs of the district.

Preston Hall, a three story brick building initially constructed in 1913 as a community building, had served as a school building for the district over the intervening years. With enrollment decline in the 1960s, the building was essentially closed and became little more than an oversized storage space. Students in grades 7-8 were served in the high school building. As enrollment began to increase again, the high school became more crowded until classrooms were bulging and every available space was being utilized throughout the entire school day. With additional enrollment growth on the horizon, more space was clearly needed. In addition, community members (particularly parents) became more and more vocal about the need to provide

a separate facility for the junior high students so they could have their own identity and be more isolated from the older high school students.

After attempts to generate voter approval for funding to build a new elementary school failed in 1989 and again in 1991, the school board decided to hire a new Superintendent and advertise for an architectural firm to complete a new study and survey of district facilities. Among the mandates from the board for the new Superintendent, the most urgent one was to develop a plan to provide the necessary school facility improvements and generate public support that would translate into the public financing needed to launch the project. The new Superintendent believed that clear and open communication coupled with community participation in establishing direction for the project were the keys to success.

After listening to a wide variety of community residents and district employees to learn background information and gain a sense of what the main issues were, the next formal step taken by the new Superintendent was the formation of a school facilities steering committee. It was the function of this group to gather and review information and provide direction for the board and Superintendent through recommendations. The Superintendent appointed four committee members who were key figures in the community. One was a city council member who had retired from a career as a school administrator in another town. A second member, also a city council member, was an employee of the local newspaper, an active member of the Waitsburg Historical Society, and the widow of a former school maintenance

and custodial employee. Two other appointees were members of the school board, both well-known community leaders. One was a young farmer and long-time community resident. The other was a machinist who was employed in a neighboring town. The committee was chaired by the Superintendent.

The first task faced by the steering committee was the selection of an architect. Although an architect had worked with the district to develop plans for the previous project proposals which were voted down, the board believed that part of the reason behind the lack of support was tied to lack of confidence in the architect. The committee discussed and established selection criteria, screened the proposals that had been submitted, and interviewed the finalists. A key characteristic desired in the architect was the ability to interact and communicate positively and effectively with members of the community and also the ability to listen and respond to the concerns and wishes of the district and community regarding the development of project plans. On the basis of the selection process the committee made a recommendation which was subsequently approved by the school board.

At about the same time that the steering committee was being established, a monthly district newsletter was also introduced. This regular written communication tool was mailed to every resident of the district with the purpose of opening the door to the flow of information about the operation of the schools. Each month, news of events related to a possible

school facilities project was included along with invitations for community involvement and feedback.

With the newsletter in place, the steering committee operating, and a new architect on board, the next step toward strengthening community involvement and participation was to hold a series of community meetings. The purpose of these meetings was to provide information to the public and gather feedback to help provide direction. The first meeting was scheduled with both a luncheon session and an evening session to accommodate the varying schedules of local citizens. Advertised in both the district newsletter and the local newspaper as well as with posters placed strategically about town, the meetings were fairly well attended with about thirty citizens at each meeting. At the meetings, the Superintendent welcomed the audience, acknowledged the members of the steering committee, provided basic information about the purpose of the meeting, and introduced the architect who shared clarifying information about school construction projects. A survey was distributed and attendees were asked to complete it before leaving the meeting. The survey asked for responses indicating the priorities of need at the various school facilities. The Superintendent promised that a summary of survey results would be made available in the local newspaper promptly.

The clear response from the survey was that addressing the need to remodel or replace the elementary school was the highest priority. However, an interesting outcome of the survey was evidence of a growing interest in

making the renovation of Preston Hall a part of the project. This interest also emerged in informal conversations with local citizens and in the Steering Committee meetings. In previous attempts to push forward a facilities project, Preston Hall had not been included. In fact, some had given thought as well as voice to a recommendation for demolition of the building. It became clear that demolition was a very unpopular idea to at least a segment of the community. Many community members remembered attending classes in Preston Hall. And many more recalled the days when the small gymnasium inside the building was the only gymnasium in the district. Nostalgic ties to the historical significance of this old school building were intense.

On the basis of feedback obtained from the first round of community meetings, a range of project options was developed. A second round of meetings was scheduled. Again information was provided, responses were heard, and people were asked to respond in writing to a survey. This survey listed three project options: elementary school only, elementary school and Preston Hall, and all three district buildings. Although large numbers favored options two and three, the steering committee settled on a recommendation that the board adopt option number two since the third option would crowd the cost toward being too high for the resources of the community.

With the scope of the project identified, the next step was to obtain funding. State matching funds were available to cover about 50 percent of the

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total project cost, but this funding could only be obtained when district voters approved issuance of bonds to cover the local share ($2.1 million). Community involvement played a large role here with the formation of a Citizens for Schools committee to provide information and get out the vote on election day. The committee was formed with a nucleus of about twelve community members representing a broad cross section of the population. Activities included an information booth at the school carnival, mailing an information brochure to all district residents, letters to the editor, advertisements in the local newspaper, presentations at local club and organization meetings, placement of yard signs in support of the election, phone calls to remind district residents to vote, and the offer of transportation to the polling place for those who needed it.

The school construction project was a heated issue in the community. Many were passionately supportive of the plan to remodel the elementary school and Preston Hall. Then there were those who were vehemently opposed, believing the costs were too high and that too great a burden was being placed on taxpayers. Based upon assessed property valuations at near market value, the proposed levy rate was $3.46/$1,000 over a twenty-year period. On Saturday before the Tuesday election, a one-page, anonymous mailer in opposition to the bond measure was placed in the mailboxes of all district residents. The Citizens for Schools committee quickly responded with a mailing countering the opposition. This was received by residents on Monday. When the election results were tallied on Tuesday night, there was

jubilation among supporters to learn that the measure was approved by a narrow margin above the required 60 percent yes vote.

With the green light of a successful bond election, the district was set to move ahead with design work. Separate building committees were established for each of the two facilities. Each committee included representation from the staff and administration of the district as well as the community. In the case of the Preston Hall building committee, two community members were appointed who were also members of the Waitsburg Historical Society. Actively involved in community affairs, this group was particularly interested in seeing that the historic integrity of Preston Hall was retained throughout the process of remodeling. Society members had actively pursued completion of the application to place Preston Hall on the National Register of Historic Places. Each decision regarding the development of design and specifications was considered in the light of the special interests of the Historical Society. At one point during design development, a joint meeting of the building committee and Waitsburg Historical Society was convened to review a variety of decisions regarding specific aspects of the work to be completed. Compromises were necessary, but a cohesive working relationship was retained. This collaboration appeared to build support for constructive involvement in other aspects of the work to follow.

Through the planning and design process it became clear that limited funding would place some restrictions on accomplishing all that the building

committees wished to include in the projects. Interested community members, led by one of the Preston Hall building committee representatives, began to inquire about how local citizens could help with the project to make the funding resources go further. It appeared, in particular, that some portions of the demolition work could be successfully accomplished by a volunteer work crew. A local farmer and bulk petroleum distributor led a group of community volunteers who completed the challenging task of removing most of the plaster and lath interior wall covering in Preston Hall, a three-story building of approximately 15,000 square feet. Wheat trucks were called into service to haul the debris, while crowbars and hard physical work did the rest. This effort alone saved the district several thousand dollars. It also seemed to cement the enthusiasm and support of the community for the project and served to mark the beginning of visible work beyond mere planning.

In order to make construction funding stretch as far as possible, it was decided to give the general contractor full access to the entire elementary building during the school year set aside for remodeling. In order to make this possible, it was necessary to find alternative spaces for approximately two hundred students in grades K-6. Again, the school district looked to the community for the answers. Agreements were reached with three local churches, the City of Waitsburg, and the McGregor Company to provide classrooms and storage space. In every case, these spaces were provided either free of charge or for only minimal fees. The spirit of cooperation and support

from the community was overwhelming. (This arrangement called for a great deal of patience and flexibility on the part of staff and students and also required the support and understanding of parents for many changes in the daily operation of the school.)

This phenomenon of cooperation and support from the community was further substantiated when it came time to move the contents of classrooms and other parts of the building into the alternate, temporary spaces. A moving day was organized and carried forward by local community members. This effort was spearheaded by the Waitsburg Lions Club. On moving day, each room's contents had been labeled according to destination. Farm trucks and pickups hitched to stock trailers and flatbed trailers lined the parking areas around the building. Volunteers arrived at 8 a.m. and were assigned to various crews. The work commenced, and the building was completely empty before noon. Members of the Waitsburg Commercial Club provided refreshments for the work crews.

As construction began in earnest, community involvement continued in the form of building committee meetings and general public observation of the process of full scale demolition and construction work. The district attempted to continue communication through the district newsletter and contact with the local newspaper publisher as well as through reports at public meetings. When construction activities were nearly complete, community volunteers moved into action again, this time to do landscape work and install an underground sprinkler system for irrigation.

The Waitsburg Lions Club was instrumental in organizing these projects. Volunteers assembled at the school at 8:00 a.m. on two weekends and worked in one hundred degree temperatures to move dirt, level it out in areas to be planted in lawn and shrubs, and to install underground pipes, valves, and sprinklers. The district purchased the materials and hired a contractor to design the irrigation system and provide supervision and direction during the work sessions. Again, the assistance of community members saved the district thousands of dollars.

Once construction was completed, the next step was moving back into the elementary school and into Preston Hall. Once more, Waitsburg residents stepped forward to get the job done. This time there was a feeling of celebration in the air as volunteers moved furniture, equipment, and supplies into the newly refurbished facilities. For many, this was their first chance to sneak a look at the finished project. Shortly after the school year began, a community open house was scheduled to celebrate completion of the projects, thank those who helped, and provide an opportunity for district residents to view the completed work.

The positive changes at both buildings have become a source of pride for the community. Preston Hall, in particular, has become the talk of the town. As if to underscore this sense of pride and accomplishment, the project received formal recognition in two separate venues. The Waitsburg Historical Society received a "Historic Preservation Award" from the Eastern Washington State Historical Society for its efforts in "promoting historic

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preservation through the renovation of Preston Hall." In addition, the project was recognized by the Spokane Chapter of the American Institute of Architects with an Award of Merit for historic preservation projects. In making the public presentation of the award, Clark Llewellyn, director of Montana State University's School of Architecture, stated that he was particularly impressed with "how a small town cared enough about a humble old building to restore it, and how the architects took a number of complex building code requirements and made them look natural."[20]

Conclusion

The experiences surrounding the Waitsburg project represent only one isolated example; however, they may be quite typical of what happens in many other rural communities. There can be little doubt that the role of community involvement in the successful completion of school facility improvement projects is a significant component.

Although a substantial number of references in the literature may be found regarding the concept of school-community involvement, writing which focuses on the ways community members may be involved in rural school construction projects is limited. Additional reporting or research centered on this topic could add to the body of information that would assist those who face the challenge of leadership in providing improved school facilities.

The topic addressed in this paper is significant for a number of reasons. For one thing, there are simply a large number of rural school facilities throughout the country. For example, according to statistics provided by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 38 percent of the school buildings and 65 percent of school districts located in the Pacific Northwest serve rural students.[21] Furthermore, based upon findings in the 1995 General Accounting Office Report[22] as well as the 1997 Construction Report provided by the Council of Educational Facility Planners, International[23] regarding the extensive need for improvement to our nation's school buildings, it may be concluded that a large number of rural school facilities need either substantial renovation or replacement. The fact that higher levels of poverty are often associated with rural areas makes the task of funding needed improvements even more difficult in districts which depend upon local funding for school construction.

The topic is also significant because of the unique role of the school in a more isolated and rural area. The centrality of schools to life in many rural communities is obvious to those who have lived and worked in such environments. Even though school-community ties are significant in any community, this relationship may be even closer in small, rural districts where the school is often the hub of life in a small town.

It is also evident that a major school construction project can appear as a more significant event in a small community than in a larger area. In some cases, the remodeling or replacement of rural school facilities may be a once

in a lifetime occurrence, whereas in a larger center, school construction projects are initiated every few years. In the small community, the project may involve all or nearly all of the district's entire facility complex, while in the larger district each project involves only a small proportion of the entire group of buildings.

Positive contributions to these projects by community groups and individuals may be a valuable and sometimes necessary part of accomplishing the task. There appears to be a strong sense of community pride and spirit in many small towns such as Waitsburg. If positive involvement in school district operations is invited through open communication, responsiveness to community wishes, and fostering a sense of community ownership, the extent of effective community support may be enhanced dramatically. There is no limit to what can be accomplished cooperatively.

Notes

1. Educational Leadership, vol. 53, no. 7 (1996); Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 78, no. 10 (1997).

2. "Crossing Boundaries: Family, Community, and School Partnerships," ed. Don Davis and Vivian R. Johnson. International Journal of Educational Research 25, no. 1 (1996): 1-105.

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6. Paul M. Nachtigal, "Rural Schools, Rural Communities: An Alternative View of the Future" (keynote address presented at the International Conference of the Rural Education Research and Development Centre, Townsville, Queensland, Australia, July 1994).

7. See, for example, Dwayne E. Gardner, "Community Based Facility Planning," Educational Facility Planner 29, no. 1 (1991): 4; and Kent G.

Stewart, "Using Citizens Committees to Assist in Referendum Campaigns," Educational Facility Planner 30, no. 1 (1992): 37.

8. Two examples of facility planning guidebooks include Guide for Planning Educational Facilities, ed. Susan K. Gwynne (Columbus, OH: Council of Educational Facility Planners, International, 1982); and John H. Holcomb, A Guide to the Planning of Educational Facilities (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1994).

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12. Examples include Rick Wilhelm and Buddy Luce, "Sharing Makes Sense," School Planning and Management, vol. 35, no. 9 (1996); and Michael Fickes, "The Community-Use Trend," School Planning and Management, vol. 37, no. 1 (1998).

13. Sandra J. Terril, "Architects Don't Build Schools - Communities Do!," Educational Facilities Planner 29, no. 3 (1991): 6-8.

14. Robert V. Carlson, "A Rural School/Community: A Case Study of a Dramatic Turnaround and Its Implications for School Improvement," Research in Rural Education 7, no. 1 (1990): 23-33.

15. Steven C. Deller, "The Effects of an Aging Rural Population on the Financing of Rural Public Education," Journal of Research in Rural Education 9, no. 2 (1993): 104-114.

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17. Laurie Freeman, "Homemade Video Sells Construction Project," School Planning and Management, vol. 35, no. 6 (1996).

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19. Eugene J. Weber, "The Role of Voluntary Organizations in a Small Town: A Case Study of Coldwater, Ohio," Small Town 26, no. 6 (1996): 12-19.

20. The Spokesman Review, 4 October 1996, sec. D

21. This statistic was obtained via internet from information provided at the web site of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (www.nwrel.org/ruraled/profiles.html).

22. School Facilities: America's Schools Not Equipped for 21st Century, Government Accounting Office Report to Congressional Requesters; GAO/HEHS 95-95 (Washington, D. C.: U. S. General Accounting Office, 1995).

23. Paul Abramson, "1997 Construction Report," School Planning and Management, available from www.cpefi.com/cefpi/1997-cr/index.html; INTERNET.

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